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SUBJECT: Child Abuse Fatalities Spark Outrage and Prompt Royal Push
for Reform

Summary

¶1. (U) The recent deaths of two Jordanian children due to child abuse has sparked a media firestorm regarding domestic violence and generated widespread community outrage, including strong public statements from the King and Queen. Queen Rania expressed concern that Jordan has "failed" to adequately protect children and she proposed new institutional reforms, including the establishment of a national system to electronically register and track all complaints of child abuse. Like honor crimes in Jordan, families are allowed to ask for leniency on behalf of the abusers. Since most abuse occurs in the family unit, advocates believe that stronger minimum penalties must be established in order to break the cycle of violence. End Summary.

Two Child Deaths Spark Royal Outcry and Action

¶2. (U) In February 2009, Qusay, a 2-year-old boy, died of a brain hemorrhage due to "shaken baby syndrome." In April 2009, Yazan, a five-year-old boy, was allegedly tortured and died from a "non accidental head injury" caused by his aunt. In the wake of their deaths, Jordan's King and Queen voiced their extreme concern over the handling of abuse cases.

¶3. (U) Speaking frankly, Queen Rania admitted that Jordan has "failed" to protect its children and called on government institutions to take action to prevent child abuse. Contacts tell us that the cases of both of the children were known to the child welfare system for several months before the actual deaths, which led the Queen to conclude there are serious "gaps" in the mechanisms used to respond to allegations of abuse.

¶4. (U) The Queen called an emergency meeting in May 2009 which included the Ministers of Education, Justice, and Health as well as the Director General of the National Council for Family Affairs (NCFA). The Council was designated as the umbrella organization designated to monitor all organizations involved in the family and child protection system. Following the meeting, the NCFA announced it will establish a new electronic program to register each case of child abuse handled by the Family Protection Department (FPD) of the Public Security Department (PSD). The program will document steps taken to resolve the case and will allow for better monitoring of cases.

One Center's Efforts to Help Abused Children

¶5. (SBU) On May 27, PolOff toured the Dar al-Amman Children's Center (part of the Jordan River Foundation) where 31 abused children currently reside. The Center takes children referred to it by the FPD once it is determined the child must be separated from the family. The brother of Yazan currently resides there.

¶6. (SBU) The Center's Director expressed frustration with the lack of accountability for abusers under the current laws. She described one case where a 10-year-old child was burned all over her body by her grandmother as punishment. Since the child's father asked the court for leniency, the grandmother was not sentenced to jail time but asked to pay just 5 JD (7 USD) fine. (Note: The director said

that she and other activists will continue to push for tougher sentences and for mandatory therapy and counseling for the abuser with a psychologist to be included in the law by court order. End note.)

¶7. (SBU) In a return visit on May 28, PolOff escorted U.S. Congresswoman Sheila Jackson-Lee for a tour of the center. The Congresswoman expressed concern over the death of Yazan and applauded the work of the Center. She called for more programs to rehabilitate victims of child abuse because "an abused child of today could be a leader of tomorrow."

Education Needed on Child Rearing, Especially Women with Boys

¶8. (SBU) Poloff also spoke with the Executive Director of the Information and Research Center at the King Hussein Foundation, who is also an outspoken journalist and advocate for children. She claims that most child abuse in Jordan is perpetrated by mothers, aunts, and grandmothers towards boys. She said this abuse can partially be traced to cultural divides which keep the genders separate. As a result, mothers and grandmothers do not know how to deal with boys and frequently lash out with violence. The director believes more education on child rearing is needed to help parents understand the needs of young children. The Jordan River Foundation has also expressed the need for more awareness about child abuse and is implementing several related-projects, including a traveling puppet show that helps children identify abuse. They will also add scenarios to portray child labor abuse.

Comment

¶9. (SBU) The issue of reduced sentences for child abuse and honor crimes continues to be a concern. In these domestic violence cases, family preferences take precedence over the rights of the victim in Jordan.

¶10. (SBU) Post is currently developing programming for \$400,000 in FY08 INL funds for domestic violence projects and will work with the police and judiciary to improve their handling of all forms of domestic violence. End Comment.

Beecroft